

Mac Town

*Where the summer sun
never sets
on Groundhog Day*

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

It just might be the ultimate deployment getaway. There's about 4,100 square miles for each deployed Airman, but be careful where you roam. At McMurdo Station, you're living on the highest, driest, coldest and windiest continent on earth.

Beyond the confines of this small scientific community lies 5.4 million square miles of mostly ice. McMurdo Station, or "Mac Town" as it's referred to by its approximately 1,000 residents, sits on the 2 percent of Antarctica that's relatively dry — but not warm. The world's coldest temperature was recorded in Antarctica at minus 128 degrees at a Russian research base in the continent's interior.

An ice sheet averaging 7,090 feet thick rests on the frigid continent which contains about 90 percent of the world's ice and 70 percent of its fresh water. Ironically, that fact seems to escape McMurdo Station where Airmen must limit their showers to only a few minutes a day as if at a remote base in Iraq.

Like most things at McMurdo, its desalinated water is a precious commodity. But at least it's locally produced. For just about everything else, McMurdo residents look to the Air

Force to bring in food, people and supplies, ranging from fuel to ice drills, each summer as part of Operation Deep Freeze.

C-141 Starlifters shuttle cargo to McMurdo weekly from Christchurch, New Zealand, which is the gateway for those going to McMurdo as part of the U.S. Antarctic Program. From McMurdo, Air Force LC-130 ski planes push supplies forward to more than a dozen remote sites. At the end

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The glow of stained glass
from the Chapel of the Snow remains constant during the antarctic summer at McMurdo Station where the sun shines around-the-clock. The chapel serves all denominations of worshippers at the world's southernmost chapel.

of summer — October through February — the flying season ends and a winter's worth of supplies is brought in by two cargo ships.

This cycle has been going on since Mac Town was built in 1955 for scientific research overseen by the National Science Foundation. And for approximately 100 members of the 109th Airlift Wing from Scotia, N.Y., McMurdo has become their "summer" residence.

Although summertime temps may never peak much above freezing, getting around by foot is comfortable and easy in an environment where the sun never sets and you're never more than a few minutes' walk from any of the approximately 85 hardscrabble buildings that make up the town.

For Master Sgt. Paul Desroches,



arriving in Mac Town on his first trip was like traveling back in time to a remote mining town from the 1930s. A confusing array of dormitories, administrative buildings, gyms, post office, power plant and assorted other metal buildings steadily climb from McMurdo Sound to the many dirt- and snow-covered hilltops surrounding it. Above it all, nearby Mount Erebus sends a steady plume skyward resembling a contrail originating from its volcanic peak.

It didn't take Sergeant Desroches long to settle into his job as first sergeant or into camp life. He joked that Airmen "don't have a lot of time to get into trouble" at McMurdo where Airmen work 12-hour days, six days a week supporting up to eight LC-130

missions a day. For many, especially maintainers who work outdoors because of the absence of hangars, life can become a routine — work, eat, work out and sleep. In many respects, it's the usual Groundhog Day syndrome found at many deployed locations. Like many deployed sites, and like mining communities in the old days, McMurdo shares a social atmosphere created from living and working in such close proximity.

"People are generally friendlier because it's a close-knit and smaller community," Sergeant Desroches said. At the end of a long work day, the first sergeant said he enjoyed the opportunity to sit down at the chow hall and socialize with members of the 109th that he rarely comes across

Master Sgt. Ken Christopher is rewarded with endless views across frozen McMurdo Sound after climbing the steep incline up Observation Hill at McMurdo Station where the guardsman from New York deployed for Operation Deep Freeze. The cross commemorates British explorer Robert Scott and his party who died on their return trip from the South Pole in 1912.

back home. They share professional and personal information about each others' lives — how many children they have, where their children attend school, and what they do for a living in their civilian lives.

Frozen in time

If Sergeant Desroches returned to McMurdo six years from now, he'd find little had changed. At Mac Town, time marches on, but the town tends

to remain much the same, said Chief Master Sgt. Tammy King.

"Nothing changes, everything's the same. Every rock is still in the same place. It feels like a time warp," said the maintenance supervisor from the 109th who made her sixth trip to the ice this season. She likes the slow pace of the McMurdo time warp and enjoys returning to a place of friendly and familiar faces.

"You may not know a person's name, but you know their faces," the chief said. Such familiarity seems to breed content people who go to McMurdo from all over the world from all walks of life.

"It doesn't matter what you do. There's not a status thing like back home. No one pulls up in a Mercedes here," she said. As for vehicle traffic, few people are seen getting in and out of any sort of vehicle at Mac Town. Most people get about by foot or by buses with tracked wheels or tires taller than most of its passengers.

For Chief King, getting about by foot is not just necessary, but a preferred means of transportation. The hills surrounding McMurdo are dotted with crosses at their peaks — inviting hikers to the top.

One of the most frequented is Observation Hill where a wooden cross was erected almost a hundred years ago in memory of the Robert Scott expedition that perished in 1912 near the end of its return trip from the South Pole. Once at the top, climbers quickly forget how winded they are when faced with magnificent views of mountains and the frozen sea where seals, penguins and pods of killer whales can be spotted. The chief said

she tries to climb the goat path up "Ob" Hill at least every other day, although not in the seven minutes claimed to be the local record. The average climber can make the ascent in about 20 minutes.

Close critter encounters

You never know who, or what, you may encounter on a stroll about McMurdo. Dr. Julie Palais, a glaciologist at the Albert P. Crary Science and Engineering Center, was returning to McMurdo from a walk to the nearby Scott Base, New Zealand's permanent research support station, when she found herself being followed through town by a young emperor penguin. As part of the Antarctic Treaty, people must abide by strict rules ensuring the local environment and its endemic residents are left alone. In this instance, the wayward yearling was safely transported back to its fellow penguins by qualified handlers.

Getting out and about like Dr. Palais is the way to make the most of a deployment to McMurdo, said Tech. Sgt. Allen Lederhouse, a maintenance controller with the 109th who spends most of his time at McMurdo in a cramped two-story building resting on skis atop the Ross Ice Shelf.

"The trip is what you make it. If you do stuff, it's a heck of an experience," he said.

Although daylight never ceases during an Antarctic summer, finding the time to take advantage of what McMurdo has to offer can be a challenge. But Sergeant Lederhouse tries something new each trip to the ice. He's crawled on his stomach through an ice tunnel to enter a spectacular ice

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cave on a tour offered by the Morale, Welfare and Recreation office. In addition to such organized trips, MWR also offers recreation equipment such as golf clubs, mountain bikes, and fly rods and waders.

Other forms of entertainment unique to McMurdo include tours of the Coast Guard icebreaker ship when it rolls into town toward the end of each summer, Nordic skiing on

McMurdo at a glance

Mission: To provide airlift for scientific research for the U.S. Antarctic Program.

Location: McMurdo is built on the bare volcanic rock of Hut Point Peninsula on Ross Island, the solid ground farthest south that is accessible by ship.

Getting around: By air: The C-141 Starlifter is the primary mode of travel getting to and from McMurdo. By boat: The Coast Guard icebreaker, Polar Star, and two tanker supply ships are the primary vessels that journey to Antarctica each year.

Population: More than 1,000 scientists and servicemembers during summer and about 160 during winter.

History: McMurdo was established in 1955 to serve as the logistics hub of the U.S. Antarctic Program. Research at and near McMurdo includes aeronomy and astrophysics, glaciology and glacial ecology, and ocean and climate systems.

Climate: Highs average in the 30s in summer and average minus 28 in winter. Winds up to 200 mph have been recorded on the coast.

Cost of living: Negligible. Billeting and meals are free for those working or assigned to McMurdo.

Recreation: Nordic skiing, indoor mountain climbing, basketball and workout facilities compose the majority of activities at McMurdo.

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frozen ice, tours of the McCrary Lab to see world-class scientific research underway, and opportunities to serve as volunteers at remote research sites. And for those with a more competitive nature, McMurdo offers events such as the Undie 500, a 500-meter sprint around nearby Scott Base garbed in underwear, the Antarctic golf driving competition at the Ice Wharf, or the USA vs. Kiwi rugby game which took place at Scott Base this year.

For those more inclined for indoor activities, they can find ballet, tai chi, bowling, yoga, belly dancing, self defense and salsa lessons. And as advertised in the base's newspaper, Antarctic Sun, if you wander into the dining hall at 8:15 p.m., it's not uncommon to find lectures being presented on topics such as the "studies on the evolution and life habits of giant, bloodthirsty, single-celled organisms called 'foraminifera.'" Far less serious entertainment is found at the Coffee House, an old Quonset

hut transformed into a cozy bar. It sometimes serves as a setting for the tractor club, in which McMurdo residents share tractor stories and bestow creative honorary tractor names upon new recruits.

And if you're lucky, you just might finagle a flight on an LC-130 to the South Pole and walk around the world in three seconds by stepping around the ceremonial marker designating the South Pole. Master Sgt. Ken Christopher did and the memory will remain with him the rest of his life.

"It was just a perfect day. Probably one of the greatest days of my life," said the information manager with the 109th. The New York guardsman said he hadn't watched a single minute of television during his deployment to take full advantage of his time in Antarctica. Guard deployments can range from two weeks to a month or longer.

He's made several treks up Observation Hill and mingled with penguins while taking strolls to Scott Base.

The U.S. Coast Guard cutter, Polar Star, breaks the ice to pave a way for two tankers waiting several miles out to deliver supplies. Deliveries weren't so readily available during the time of British explorer Robert Scott when his party built the Discovery Hut (foreground) as a land base for sledging treks. Residents at McMurdo Station can visit the nearby historical site where supplies such as dog biscuits and mutton still remain waiting for the Scott party that never returned from its trek to the South Pole.

And he too enjoys the camaraderie and the opportunity to become better acquainted with fellow guardsmen, as well as other residents at McMurdo such as cooks, scientists and taxi drivers.

"I'm going to take in every single aspect of this place and try to remember it the rest of my life," said Sergeant Christopher, who is an electrician with the General Electric Co., back home in his other job. During his 35 years in the Guard, Sergeant Christopher has seen his share of travel around the world, but McMurdo is special.

"The Grand Canyon is impressive, but this has got it all beat."